

## Environmental impact of South Mountain Freeway debated

by **Colleen Sparks** - Apr. 18, 2008 02:57 PM  
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The proposed South Mountain Freeway would cut through mountain ridges, remove native vegetation and could change wildlife travel routes, a study team is reporting. But how the landscape looks and how native plants and animals are affected can be mitigated, members of the study team led by the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) said.

Biologists and other experts told the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team Thursday night how the proposed freeway would change the landscape in Ahwatukee Foothills and in the West Valley during an advisory team meeting at South Mountain **Community College**. The freeway would run along the Pecos Road alignment in Ahwatukee and cut through South Mountain Park.

The citizens group will eventually recommend whether it thinks the freeway should be built.

"There's nothing particularly unusual about this project compared to other projects in the Valley," said Carl Petrich, an **environmental** planner with HDR Engineering.

The proposed freeway would call for "severe" cuts in South Mountain's ridges, similar to ones created on U.S. Highway 93 near Hoover Dam, Petrich said.

The cuts for the South Mountain Freeway

would range from 120 to 220 feet deep, ADOT estimates.

Workers could use vegetative buffers to screen views of the freeway and leave rock outcrops in place, when possible, to reduce the visual effects of the freeway.

Also, earth-tone colors can be used for overpasses, abutments, sound barriers and screen walls.

Ahwatukee resident and citizens team member John Rodriguez asked if the freeway's \$1.7 billion estimated cost would jump to \$2 billion if it was built below-grade and higher **gasoline** and petroleum costs were factored in.

Ben Spargo, a project engineer with HDR, said the \$1.7 billion estimate included "contingencies like well replacements." ADOT will update cost estimates "as the process moves forward," said Tim Tait, ADOT community relations director and a member of the freeway study team.

HDR biologist Kevin Grove said palo verde; mesquite, creosote bush, as well as several

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types of cacti are found along the proposed route.

If native vegetation were removed, it would remove shelter, foraging and nesting supplies for wildlife, which include jackrabbits, ground squirrels, javelina, desert tortoises and bats, Grove said.

Construction equipment could bring seeds leading to invasive plant species that could "take hold or out-compete" native plants, he said. Seeding soils, salvaging native plants and replanting them elsewhere and washing construction equipment are some ways to help the native plants, Grove said.

Fencing could keep wildlife from crossing traffic and wildlife crossings could be constructed along parts of the freeway, he said.

Ahwatukee resident Adelheid Fischer, said she was concerned about light pollution because "scientific studies around the country have found artificial light disrupts animals' normal activities and behavior."

"I drive freeways at night and they are lit up like Christmas trees," Fischer said.

Ahwatukee resident Dan Johnson asked how construction would impact adjacent homes and businesses in the village.

Neighborhoods will be notified about construction plans, Spargo said. Impacts are discussed at the citizens group meetings, Tait said.

Ahwatukee resident Jim Jochim called the presentation Thursday "half-baked."

"Nobody really understands the permanent damage that's going to be done here in

Ahwatukee Foothills, (to) the environment, the animals, the noise, the pollution," said Jochim, director of Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children, a group that formed to oppose the freeway.

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